

## Concept *triguna*: A critical analysis and synthesis

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*The triguna concept of the Indian tradition has attracted the attention of psychologists in India involved in the development of indigenous theories and models of human behaviour, specifically personality. Here the attempts made to develop personality inventories and relate gunas to psychological constructs prevalent in modern psychology are briefly reviewed. The paper further analyses these attempts critically and endeavours to clarify the concept guna based on etymology and exhaustive indigenous literature survey. A conceptual synthesis is arrived at taking into account the traditional textual interpretations and the interpretation of the psychologists.*

**Key WORDS:** TRIGUNA, SATTVA, RAJAS, TAMAS, and PERSONALITY

### Introduction

With the increasing realization that many of the western psychological concepts and methods lack relevance to different cultural systems the need for developing indigenous psychologies was recognized all over the world (Kim & Berry, 1973). In India, attempts have been made for almost a century to develop indigenous models and theories from the rich source of knowledge viz., the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other philosophical texts. In recent times more and more researchers have taken active interest in indigenizing and developing indigenous psychology (Kumar, in press; Misra & Mohanty, 2000; Paranjpe, 1999; Srivastava, 2002). The structure, nature and evolution of human personality are elaborated in these sources with special reference to the concept *triguna*.

The concept *triguna* is mentioned in Atharva Veda. However, it is in the *Sāmkhya* system, that this concept has gained prominence as a major explanatory construct. *Sāmkhya* is a dualistic philosophy, which postulates two interdependent, simultaneously existing reality *purusha* (Consciousness) and *prakrti* (nature or matter). Apart from the *purusha*, which forms the inner core of the personality, everything in the universe, physical and psychological, including the mind, are regarded as originated from *prakrti*, which is constituted of three *gunas* viz., *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These *gunas* act together and never exist in isolation. They interact and compete with each other resulting in the preponderance of one over the others. The degree of predominance of one *guna* determines the individual's personality type. Based on the above understanding, personalities are categorized into three, viz., *sāttvic*, *rājasic* and *tāmasic* types (Rao, 1966).

### I. *Triguna* and Modern Psychology

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The theoretical expositions on *triguna* and their manifestations in human nature have attracted the attention of Indian psychologists. The concept has been examined theoretically (Boss, 1966; Misra et al., 2000; Parameshwaran, 1969; Rao, 1971) and empirically (Das, 1987, 1991; Kapur et al., 1997; Marutham, Balodhi and Misra, 1998; Mathew, 1995; Mohan and Sandhu, 1986, 1988; Pathak, Bhatt & Sharma, 1992; Rao and Harigopal, 1979; Sebastian and Mathew, 2002; Sharma, 1999; Singh, 1972; Sitamma, Sridevi and P.V.K. Rao, 1995; Uma, Lakshmi and Parameshwaran, 1971; Wolf, 1998). Descriptions of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* and their manifestations in human nature as understood by psychologists are summarized in table 1. Attempts at operationalization and measurement of the concept are summarized in table 2. The two tables show the differences that exist from one investigator to other in the conceptualization and descriptions of the *gunas*, which raise many issues.

### 1. 1. Differences in descriptions of the manifestations of *triguna* in behaviour

The investigators differ in their definitions of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. They also differ in their descriptions of the manifestations of *triguna* in human behaviour. Each investigator lists a number of attributes that are said to represent *sāttvic*, *rājasic* or *tāmasic* qualities. However, each description is a partial account and covers only certain aspects of the manifestation of a particular *guna*. This has led to accumulation of terminologies, which complicate the understanding of the concept in relation to behaviour (see table 1).

**Table 1 - Definitions and manifestations of *triguna* in human nature as conceptualized by modern researchers**

<b>Author &amp; Year</b>	<b>Sattva</b>	<b>Rajas</b>	<b>Tamas</b>
Uma , 1969	<b>Good</b> , self-control, generosity, <b>intelligence</b> , steadiness, humility, yearning for liberation, guiltlessness, unselfishness, <b>purity</b> , contentment, truthfulness, faith, devotion.	<b>Impure, bad, active</b> , lack of control on emotions, passionate, restlessness, anxiety, desires, attachments, greed.	<b>Neutral, indifferent</b> , stupidity, doubt, dullness, inadvertence, uncertainty, negligence, cynicism, delusions, inaction, misunderstanding, lassitude, undisciplined, fear, and sorrow.
Pathak et al 1982	<b>Knowledge</b> Illumine, light, <b>Peace</b>	<b>Activity Pain</b>	<b>Inertia</b> Darkness, Delusion
Mathew, 1995	<b>Stability</b> High Self-awareness Sensitivity, Freedom, Flexibility, Control, Stress, Tolerate & freedom from maladjustment tendencies	<b>Activation</b> Restless , over activity, Uncontrolled energy, high drive, inability to remain silent or alone, Extraverted instability	<b>Inertia</b> , Introverted Instability, Lethargy, Fear, and inhibition, Anxiety, Shallowness of emotions, Low initiative, Low self- confidence, and Low self-respect.

Marutham et al., 1998	<b>Essence</b> Purity, Harmony, Noble & Divine	<b>Motion,</b> Passion, Activity	<b>Inertia</b> Inactivity, Sloth, Foolishness
Wolf, 1998	Cleanliness, truth, discipline, mental equilibrium, determination, detachment	Desire for sense gratification, dissatisfaction, envy, materialistic mentality	Mental imbalance, anger, arrogance, depression, procrastination, feelings of helplessness

It is evident from the table that investigators have differed in their conceptualizations of *triguna*. The psychological attributes related to *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* measured in different instruments developed by them are not uniform, though there is some agreement with regard to their essential nature. For instance, out of five investigators three characterize *rajas* as activity and *tamas* as inertia. Regarding *sattva* no such agreement is found, and each one has characterized it in a different way and even the attributes do not share much in common. Similarly, even with respect to *rajas* and *tamas*, the behavioural attributes addressed by investigators differ. Such differences render the inventories non-comparable and conceptual dissimilarities lead to problems of construct and criterion validation.

### 1.2. Variations in the structure and components of the measures of *triguna*

In addition to the differences related to the construct, there are other differences in the measures developed. First, there is variation in the number of categories or sub-scales or factors of *triguna* recognized or arrived at by different investigators. For e.g., Das (1987) considers 10 aspects on which the *sāttvics*, *rājasics* and *tāmasics* differ. Mathew (1995) has employed 35 sub-scales; Kapur et al (1997) categorize dispositions into two broad aspects viz., ‘biosocial’ and ‘psychosocial’ under each of which 8 sub-aspects are considered that differentiates the three types. The rest of the investigators do not make any such differentiations (Wolf, 1998; Pathak et al., 1992; Mohan & Sandhu, 1986; Singh, 1972; Uma et al., 1971).

Second, the measures also vary in the way *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, themselves are regarded i.e., as independent dimensions or as co-existing. Parameshwaran (1969) and Uma, Lakshmi & Parameshwaran (1971) do not consider interaction among *gunas* and their predominance. Though they consider *triguna* as three independent dimensions theoretically, the correlation obtained shows significant relation for *rajas* and *tamas* and not for *tamas* and *sattva* or *sattva* and *rajas*. Mohan and Sandhu (1986, 1988) consider them as separate dimensions with one being dominant. They found that *sattva* was distinct from *rajas* and *tamas* (cited in Sitamma et al., 1995).

Das (1987, 1991) approaches descriptions of the characteristics of the three *gunas* as outlined in *Bhagavad-Gita* and envisaged of one *guna* as being predominant. He has found that *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are negatively correlated at significant levels and *rajas* is closer to *sattva* than *tamas* in the hierarchy.

**Table 2 Personality inventories based on *guna* theory**

Author and year	Name of the tool	No. Of items	Reliability For S, R & T	Validity	Correlates Studied
Uma et	<i>Guna</i>	80 -			Introversion and

al., 1971	<i>Inventory</i>	24S,27R,29T			Extraversion
Singh, 1972	<i>A Temperament Schedule</i>	–			Temperamental condition, beliefs, attitudes, values and cognitions.
Mohan & Sandhu, 1986, 1988	<i>Triguna Personality Inventory (TGPI)</i>	–			Introversion, Extroversion, Psychoticism.
Das, 1987, 1991	<i>Inventory based on the Gita Personality Typology.</i>	10 Triplets	–	Content validity	–
Pathak, Bhatt and Sharma, 1992	<i>Personality Inventory Based On Triguna</i>  <i>Short Version</i>	88 24S, 34R, 30T 40	Test-retest 0.62,0.83 &0.70 0.72,0.80 & 0.66	–	Job satisfaction
Wolf, 1998	<i>Vedic Personality Inventory (VPI)</i>	90 30S, 28R, 32T	Cronbach's alpha 0.89,0.91,& 0.85	Face, content & construct validity	Verbal aggressiveness, Satisfaction With Life
Mathew, 1995	<i>Inertia, Activity, Stability (IAS) Rating scale</i>	35 35 each	Split – half 0.73, 0.89 & 0.86 for I, A & S scales	Construct validity	PSI experience
Kapur et al., 1997	<i>Infant Temperamental Profile</i>	<b>17</b>	-	-	Infant temperament
Marutham, Balodhi and Mishra, 1998	<i>Sattva, Rajas, Tamas (SRT) Inventory.</i>	120 40 items each	–	Content validity	–

Pathak, Bhatt and Sharma (1992) consider *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* as independent of each other. They have developed percentiles, categorized norms and standard scores for normal population. *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* scales show low correlation with each other, indicating independence among the three dimensions.

Mathew (1995) views *triguna* as broad behavioral tendencies or personality components. They cut across cognitive, temperament and motivational modalities. The scale is a revision of two earlier personality inventories developed by the author: The SRT Inventory (Mathew, 1972) and the Mathew Temperament Scale (Mathew, 1976).

Kapur et al (1997) attempt to provide a theoretical model of infant temperament based on ancient Indian thought with special focus on the resilient or competent child. Most of the items of the checklist are drawn from the items of the inventory developed

by Marutham (1992) for adult population, along with some items from the standard checklist used in studies on temperament in the west.

Marutham et al (1998) considers the three factors as independent of each other. The inventory is constructed on the views depicted in *Sāmkhya Kārikā* and *Bhagavad-Gita*. However, correlations between *sattva* and *rajas*, and *sattva* and *tamas* are significant though not high. This shows low independence among the three factors.

Wolf (1998) bases his understanding of the concept of *guna* on *Vaishnava* texts. Inter sub-scale correlations show positive correlations between items of *tamas* and *rajas* sub-scales. The author also recognizes that several items that were representative of one mode would be expected to have a strong secondary mode.

In summary, the investigators have conceptualized *trigunas* differently: as ‘three aspects or dimensions of human temperament and personality’ (Uma, Lakshmi & Parmeshwaran, 1971; Marutham, Balodhi & Misra, 1998); as ‘temperamental conditions of an individual’ (Singh, 1972); as ‘types of personality’ (Mohan & Sandhu, 1986; Das, 1987; Wolf, 1998; Pathak, Bhatt & Sharma, 1992); and as ‘three broad behavioural tendencies’ (Mathew, 1995). In general, the statistical findings show that the three *gunas* have certain degree of correlation and cannot be considered as independent dimensions. This seems to go with the traditional view, which posits that the three *guna* exist together and co-constitute *prakṛti*.

Third issue is how the nature of *guna* per se is viewed. Most authors use terms like components, aspects, factors, dimensions, qualities and tendencies interchangeably while describing *gunas*, thus making it difficult to answer the question – “What are *gunas*?”

### **1. 3. Guna and its correlates**

In addition to scale constructions, investigators have examined *triguna* vis-à-vis psychological constructs as measured by modern psychologists. For instance, attempts have been made to relate *gunas* to already established conventional personality types (e.g., introversion - extraversion) and psychological processes (e.g., cognitions, ESP etc.). The findings are summarized below.

*Sāttvic* personalities tend to be introverts (Uma, Lakshmi & Parameshwaran, 1971; Mohan & Sandhu, 1988); have clear cognitions and perceptions (Singh, 1972; Sitamma et al, 1995); tend to be relatively less verbally aggressive (Wolf, 1998); are capable of PSI and ESP experiences (Sebastian & Mathew, 2002); and prefer self-growth (Sharma, 1999).

*Rājasic* personalities tend to be extraverted (Uma, Lakshmi & Parameshwaran, 1971; Mohan & Sandhu, 1988); have clear cognitions and sharp perceptions (Singh, 1972); show high verbal aggressiveness and less satisfaction with life (Wolf, 1998); and experience less job satisfaction (Sharma, 1999).

*Tāmasic* personalities show tendencies towards psychoticism (Mohan & Sandhu, 1988); have poor cognition, defective memory and delusions (Sinha, 1972; Sitamma et al, 1995); experience less satisfaction with life (Wolf, 1998); and show low ESP abilities (P.V. K. Rao and Harigopal, 1979).

Such attempts to relate *triguna* to behavior as understood from modern psychological view point are not systematic and theory driven, though the relations confirm the traditional understanding of *sāttvic*, *rājasic* and *tāmasic* qualities to some extent. Further, such aspects of human nature like emotions, attitudes, preferences,

lifestyle etc., which have been linked with *triguna* in Bhagavad-Gita in particular and in other texts in general, have yet to be examined and clarified empirically.

## **II Rediscovering *triguna***

### **2. Source of differences and variations**

It is to be noted that the conceptual problems discussed above have their origin in Indian intellectual tradition itself and such differences exist even among contemporary philosophers and ancient scholars of *Sāmkhya* tradition in their opinions with regard to the origin, meaning, etymology, characteristics and manifestations of *triguna*. The differences among the scholars of the *Sāmkhya* tradition have led to the innumerable descriptions, in turn leading to varied understanding among philosophers of the present. Naturally, psychologists have differed in their understanding of *triguna*, since they have anchored their work in different sources.

Larson and Bhattacharya (1987) and Dasgupta (1974) account for the lack of agreement among scholars, the multiplicity of terms and meanings with reference to the following aspects. According to them the evolution of the *Sāmkhya* system through history (i.e., from the time of the *Rig-Veda* when the idea of *guna* was loosely formed to the period of the *Sāmkhya* system when it was concretized and to the present) has led to proliferation of innumerable translations and interpretations. In turn they have led to complexity in understanding the concept of *guna*. Second reason is the language in which the source books describe it. A term in Sanskrit derives its meaning from the root and the grammatical rules of the formation of words. Moreover the meanings and interpretations a word i.e., *guna* or *sattva* or *rajas* or *tamas*, obtains is influenced by its contextual usage and corresponding change in the meaning in ancient scriptures like *Mahābhāratha*, *Upanishads*, *Bramhasūtras*, and the *Sāmkhya Kārikā* etc., which lead to differences in interpretations of their nature, characteristics and manifestations.

In addition, translation of these terms and descriptions from Sanskrit to English pose serious linguistic problems (K.B.R Rao, 1966; Uma, 1969) resulting in inadequate and incomplete rendering of terms. The English translations are limited in their expression and meaning compared to the more comprehensive Sanskrit terms. As the Sanskrit terminologies are derived from the root verbs, they are self-explanatory whereas, the English translations are barely an attempt to be closer to the meaning of the Sanskrit term. Hence, English translations cannot be considered as equivalent to Sanskrit terminologies. As a result of all these, the concept *guna* is interpreted variously leading to accumulation of terms and to the complexity of the concept. However, in order to make use of *gunas* in contemporary psychology in a technical manner, it becomes a necessity to arrive at some consensus. To arrive at some clarity on the issues discussed above following qualitative procedures were followed: a) dictionary study and b) textual and interpretative analysis.

#### **2.1 Dictionary study**

Sanskrit-English dictionaries (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Jha, 1928; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964) list a number of meanings for the term *guna*. They include to multiply; to advice; to invite, and to develop in the verb form. It also means string, thread, rope; a multiplier; excellence; ingredient, constituent; quality; a subordinate; excess; coefficient; kind; and virtue. With so many meanings accumulating over thousands of years in Sanskrit language, who's English

translation we find in modern dictionaries, it is very arduous to fix the exact meaning of *guna* and understand its psychological connotations.

Sanskrit scholars use different methods to fix the meaning of a term. According to *Muktāvali* of Vishwanātha they include (1) referring to the grammar (*vyākaraṇa*); (2) metaphor (*upamāna*); (3) traditional Sanskrit dictionary (*amara koṣha*); (4) word of an authority (*āptavākya*); (5) usage (*vyavahāra*); (6) (*vākya shesha*), (7) explanation (*vivarana*); and (8) context (*sānnidhya*). Here, a few of these are followed. The help of Sanskrit scholars<sup>3</sup> were sought to understand the relation between the derivation of the term and the several meanings; the most appropriate meaning in the present context; and their psychological significance.

Among the different meanings, ‘to invite’ appears to have been derived from *guna āmantrane*, as per Sanskrit grammar (*dhātu pāṭha*). According to *Sāmkhya* philosophy *guna* constitutes *prakṛti* and *prakṛti* (primal nature) is compared to a dancer (*nartakī*) in *Sāmkhya Kārikā* (SK 59) who exhibits herself to *puruṣa* (Spirit) (Shastri, 1930). The idea of “inviting” is implicit here. In a similar way *Sāmkhya* Philosophy considers *guna* (*prakṛti*) as “subordinate” to *puruṣa* and serve a purpose of something other than itself (SK, 17) (Shastri, 1930). *Amara Koṣha* also uses the term *guna* in the sense of “subordinate”. Further, *guna* has the meaning of thread and rope, in the sense of their function “to bind”, as derived from the root *gun*. In Bhagavad-Gita it is stated that *triguna* bind (*nibadhnati*) the “owner of the body” or the “one who inheres in the body” (*dehī*) (BG, 14, 5). How this happens is described further in BG, 14, 6-8. The term *guna* is also used to refer to “quality” of a substance. But it is made clear in the commentary of Shankaracharya on BG-14-5 that *guna* is *prakṛti* itself and not the attribute of something else.

Considering these possibilities, it can be stated that the term *guna* though has several meanings, refers to *prakṛti* itself and its usage in *Sāmkhya* and Bhagavad Gita should form the basis for psychologists. From operational point of view it is *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* that are important not the term *guna* per se. It is just a super ordinate concept and when we have to transact to understand human behaviour, it is the latter three concepts that are more important for us. Hence, in psychological literature it may be more appropriate to use *triguna* rather than just *guna* to avoid confusion in meanings. It is also necessary to clarify the psychological connotations of these three *gunas*.

The term *sattva* is derived from the root verb ‘*as*’ which means “to be”, which is related to *asti* that is equivalent to “is”. The word *sattva* is formed as ‘*sat + tva*’ which is explained as ‘*sato bhāvaha*’. The dictionaries list the following English terms as meaning of *sattva*, some of which directly represent the root meaning- being, existing, occurring, happening; living, lasting, enduring; real, actual, true (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964). From this *sattva* is interpreted to mean existence; reality, true essence; nature, natural character; disposition of mind or character; vital breath, life; energy; and consciousness. There are other meanings like strength of character; firmness, resolution, courage; self-command; good sense; magnanimity; purity; goodness; good, right; beautiful; wise;

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<sup>3</sup> Authors are grateful to Dr. Gangadhara Bhatta and Dr. H. V. Nagaraja Rao for their help in clarifying the relation between the root meanings and the usages of *guna*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in different contexts.

honest; venerable, genuine; respectable people; and virtuous (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964), which represent human behaviour and qualities. How such qualities and behaviour are related to *triguna* is a question that will be addressed in the next section.

Similarly, the term *rajas* is derived from the root *ranj*, which means to be dyed, coloured, grow red, glow, moved, affected, excited, delighted, attracted so on as used by many. Bhagavad-Gita (14, 7) uses the term in this sense – *rajo rāgātmakam viddhi* (understand that *rajas* is of the nature of dyeing). However, Benfey (1982) differentiates the meanings of the possible roots for *rajas* as ‘*rangh*’ meaning to go, to move swiftly; as ‘*raja*’ meaning dust, pollen, quality of passion; and as ‘*ranj*’ meaning to dye, to colour; to be attached; to glow, affected, red; to go, agitated; and fond. Macdonell (1924) regards ‘*rajya*’ as having ‘*brilliance*’ as its original meaning which is opposed to the original meaning of ‘*rajas*’ i.e., dimness given by Benfey (1982). The word *rajas* is interpreted to mean vapour, mist, clouds, gloom, dimness, darkness; impurity, dirt, dust, the darkening quality; passion, emotion, affection etc. (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964). *Rajas* when identified as *tejas* means to be active, urgent and variable (Williams, 1964). All these meanings have been used in different contexts to describe human behaviour and psychologists have incorporated them.

The term *tamas* is derived from the root ‘*tam*’ which means to gasp for breath; affecting; choke; exhausted; perish; be distressed or disturbed; become immovable or stiff; wish, desire; pained. (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964). Among these, according to Sanskrit scholars, the meaning exhaustion is close to the root *tam*. It also indicates lack of activity. While the term ‘*tama*’ means night (Williams, 1964) ‘*tamas*’ means hell, groping in the dark and mental perplexity (Williams, 1964); ‘*tamam*’ means darkness; and ‘*tamata*’ means desirous, longing, wished (Apte, 1975). The term *tamas* is formed from ‘*tam + as*’ which is explained as ‘*tamayate tam (glanau) asun*’ (Gopalacharya, 1967).

In Bhagavad-Gita (14, 8) *tamas* is characterized as being born of ignorance (*tamastvajnānājam viddhi*). In this sense the terms darkness, hell, gloom; led into darkness, deprived of light or sight; mental darkness, ignorance; illusion, error; the cause of heaviness, lust; anger; pride; sorrow; stupidity, dullness and stolidity (Apte, 1975; Benfey, 1982; Gopalacharya, 1967; Macdonell, 1924; Williams, 1964) have been used.

## 2.2. Textual and interpretative analysis

Though the concept *guna* is believed to have originated in the Vedic period, it is understood to have developed in clarity in the *Sāmkhya* system of philosophy. Therefore, the textual and interpretative analysis is based on authentic English translations of following source books: *Sāmkhya Kārikā* of Isvara Krishna and *Kapila Sāmkhya* (Larson, 1969; Shastri, 1930; Wilson, 1887). In addition, various commentaries to these sources written through 500 B.C to 20th century A.D of which Vacaspathi Misra’s *Sāmkhyatattvakaumudi*, *Sāmkhyapravachanasootram* of Pancasika, *Sāmkhyatattvaloka* by Swami Hariharananda Aranya are regarded as exemplary works and for which English translations are available are also referred to. Few other commentaries like *Jayamangala* by Jayamangala, *Matharavrtti* by Mathara, *Tattvavibhākara* by Vamshidhara Misra, *Sāmkhyataruvasantha* by Mudumba



Narasimha Swamin, *Sāraprabha* by Kalipada Tarkacharya, *Sāmkhyasaptativritti* (Author unknown), *Bhāshya* of *Sāmkhya Kārikā* by Gaudapada, which are considered as authentic, are not available in their original form. Therefore, the summaries of each of these works available in a secondary source (Larson and Bhattacharya, 1987) are also consulted.

### 2.2.1 *Guna* in *Sāmkhya Kārikā*

Isvarakrishna, the author of *Sāmkhya Kārikā*, the scripture most referred to by scholars due to its authority, describes the nature and characteristics of *triguna*, in verses 12 and 13. The 12<sup>th</sup> verse says –

***prītyaprītivishādātmakah prakāśapravṛttinīyamārthāḥ |***  
***anyonyā'bhibhavā'shraya-janana-mithunavṛttayas ca gunāḥ ||***

Shastri (1930) translates this *kārikā* as follows. “The constituents are of the nature of pleasure, pain and indifference; they serve to illumine, to actuate and to restrain; each of these functions through suppression, co-operation, transformation and intimate intercourse with and by the rest” (p. 36). The author of *Sāmkhya Kārikā* does not give any further explanation as to how the three *guna* represent three kinds of human experience and how they are responsible for the three functions. But it is striking that the so called fundamental constituents underlying the whole manifest universe are described with reference to human feelings.

It is also significant to note that Gaudapada's commentary on *Sāmkhya Kārikā* being translated by a number of authors has led to differences in the English terms used for '*prītaprītivishāda*'. Colebrooke (1939) for example, translated them as goodness, foulness and darkness and equates it to be the same as agreeable, disagreeable and indifference. He further interprets Gaudapada as explaining all that is *sattva* /goodness as pleasant, *rajas*/foulness as pain and *tamas*/darkness as dullness or stupidity. Larson (1969) translates *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* as intelligibility, activity and inertia and *prīti*, *aprīti* and *visāda* as agreeable, disagreeable and oppressive.

The terms '*ātmakah*' (in *SK*) and '*dharma*' (Kapila cited by Ballantyne, 1984), both meaning 'nature', are used to explain what (*prīti*, *aprīti*, and *vishāda* are in relation to *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The various exponents on the *Sāmkhya* system also agree with this view (Vachaspati, cited by Jha, 1965; Panchanana Tarkarathna, Mathara, Panchasika, Jayamangala, Vijananabhikshu and Gaudapada cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987). The usage of '*eva*' (itself) in *Sāmkhya Kārikā*, Kapila's aphorisms and *Tattvakaumudi* indicates that *prīti* is *sattva*, *aprīti* is *rajas*, etc. Again the questions how they are so and what are the bases of such conclusions are not discussed

Similarly, the terms *prakāśa*, *pravṛtti* and *niyama* in the 12<sup>th</sup> verse are also interpreted and translated variously by authors, as illumination, activity and restriction / restraint (Jayamangala; Mudumba Narasimhan cited in Larson and Bhattacharya, 1987); as awareness, activity and inertia; as manifestation, activity and restraint / regulation (Panchanana Tarkarathna; Gaudapada cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987) and as that which serves to illuminate, actuate and restrain (S.S. Shastri, 1930). However the term '*artha*' is interpreted as '*prayojana*' as 'effects in' or as that which 'aids to' or 'serves to'. Thus, '*prakāśa*' '*pravṛtti*' and '*niyama*' are regarded as capability, function or purpose of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Even the next verse, 13<sup>th</sup>, also does not help us much in understanding this relation, but throws a little more light on the nature and functions of the three gunas.

**“Sattvam laghu prakāshakam istamupastambakam calam ca rajah|  
guru varanakam eva tamahpradipavac carthato vrittih ||**

Shastri (1930) translates this kārikā as follows. “Sattva is considered to be buoyant and bright, Rajas to be stimulating and mobile; Tamas alone is heavy and enveloping; their functioning for the goal (of the Spirit) is like (the action of) a lamp” (p.38).

**2.2.2 Guna in commentaries on Sāmkhya Kārikā** Apart from the descriptions of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* given by Isvara Krishna, various exegeses of *Sāmkhya* tradition have described them in their commentaries on *Sāmkhya Kārikā* and Kapila’s *Sāmkhya*. From each of these sources, Sanskrit verses describing *trigunas* are picked and their interpretations studied. The Sanskrit terms used to describe *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are listed and their English translations by respective authors are presented in table 3.

**Table 3. Sanskrit terms used as equivalents or definitions of the three gunas.**

Source	Author	Sattva	Rajas	Tamas
<i>Jayamangala</i>	Jayamangala	<i>Nirmala</i> (pure)	-----	<i>Anirmala</i> (impure/dirty)
<i>Mātharaavritti</i>	Māthara	<i>Prīti</i> (agreeable) <i>sukha</i> (satisfying)	<i>Aprīti</i> (frustration)	<i>visāda</i> (oppression) <i>moha</i> (confusion)
<i>Tattvavibhākarā</i>	Vamsidhara Misra	<i>Prakāsha</i> (illuminating)	<i>ranjana</i> (colouring)	<i>Āvarana</i> (concealing)
<i>Sāmkhya-taruvasanta</i>	Mudumba Narasimha swamin	<i>prakāsha</i> (illumination)  <i>lāghava</i> (buoyance)	<i>Pravritti</i> (activity)	<i>Nivartana</i> (restraint)  <i>Durbharatva</i> (heaviness)
<i>Sāmkhyakārikā bhashya</i>	Gaudapada	<i>vishuddha</i> (pure) <i>samartha</i> (capable) <i>shānta</i> (tranquility )	<i>Ghōra</i> (uncomfortable)	<i>Mūḍha</i> (confusing)
<i>Sāmkhya-tattvaloka</i>	Swami Hariharananda Aranya	<i>prakāshasheela</i> <i>bhāva</i>	<i>Kriyāsheela</i> <i>bhāva</i>	<i>Sthitisheela bhāva</i>
<i>Tattvakaumudi</i>	Vachaspathi Misra	<i>sukha</i> = <i>prīti</i> (pleasure) <i>laghu</i> (light)	<i>dukha</i> = <i>aprīti</i> (pain) <i>pravartaka</i> (activity) <i>cala</i>	<i>vishāda</i> = <i>moha</i> (delusion)  <i>guru</i> (sluggish)

		<i>prakāsha</i> (illumi nativeness)	(mobile) <i>upasthambaka</i> (exitingness)	<i>varanaka</i> (envelopingness)
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### 2.2.3 Manifestation of *triguna* in human nature as delineated in other sources

Apart from the terms and verses descriptive of the meaning and characteristics of *triguna*, information regarding the manifestation of *triguna* in human nature was available in the literature. Since this forms the focus of psychologists, it was studied. The Sanskrit terms used to explain the manifestations of *triguna* in human nature were listed from *Aswamedhika Parva* of *Mahābhāratha*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Sāmkhya Kārikā*, *Sāmkhya Chandrika* and *Sāmkhyasaptatvrtti*. The manifestations of *trigunas* described in the *Mahābhāratha* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* are exhaustive and therefore all those descriptions are not covered here. There is not much disagreement among scholars of the past and present regarding the multiplicity of expression of *triguna* especially in human nature.

What is called *sattva* is considered as having innumerable manifestations such as happiness, lightness, love, agreeableness, renunciation, contentment, joy, bliss etc. They are summed up as ‘pleasant’ meaning satisfaction (Panchasika cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987).

Similarly, *rajas*, which is ‘*apriti*’ (aversion) or ‘*dukha*’ (pain) primarily, manifests as described in *Kramadipika*; as misery, perspiration, anxiety, anger, and vanity. It is described in such terms as hate, animosity, jealousy, reproach, rigidity, anxiety, wickedness, deception, bondage, killing, cutting etc., by Mathara (cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987); as including hatred, violence, malice, censure, humiliation, envy and disgrace by Narayana Tritha (cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987).

*Tamas* which is of the nature of *moha* (delusion/confusion) and *vishāda* (disgust), is described as ignorance, vanity, sloth, fear, misery, inactivity, infidelity, sorrowfulness, dream etc., by Mathara (cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987); as veiling, covering, ugliness, poverty, idleness, delusion, etc., by Kramadipika (cited in Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987); and as deceit, fear, wickedness, imbecility and ignorance (Shivakumar, 1986). However, *Sāmkhyasaptatvrtti* views all these manifestations as characteristics of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (Larson & Bhattacharya, 1987).

### 2.3 Etymology and interpretation of the terms used to describe *triguna*

The etymology of Sanskrit terms viz., *prīti*, *apṛīti*, *vishāda*, *prakāsha*, *pravṛtti*, *niyama*, *laghu*, *varanaka* etc. (refer table 3), which were used by scholars of the *Sāmkhya* tradition to describe *trigunas* was studied to recognize their most common meaning. The etymological senses were compared with the interpretations of the scholars of the past and the present. All the Sanskrit words describing the *trigunas* in the available source books were listed and the most commonly used terms picked out. The English equivalents for these terms as given in the Sanskrit – English dictionary

(Apte, 1975), and as given by the authentic translations of these source books both in English (Dutt, 1897) and Kannada (Ranganathananda, 2002) languages are compared. The Oxford Reference Dictionary (Soanes, 2001) is used to compare the meanings given in translations of source books and their dictionary meanings in English so as to derive the best suited English meaning of the terms in relation to the context of usage in respective verses. The etymology and the most commonly used and accepted interpretations of the meaning of the terms close to the etymology are delineated and listed in Table 4.

**Table 4. Most common Sanskrit terms used to characterize *triguna* with etymologically suitable meaning.**

Source*	<i>Sattva</i>	<i>Rajas</i>	<i>Tamas</i>
SK, SSV, MV, KS, TK	<b><i>priti</i> ‘pri-ti’</b> (Pleasure/delight/ joy/gladness/friendly disposition/satisfaction)	<b><i>apriti</i> ‘a-pri-ti’</b> (Disagreeable/enmity/ aversion/dislike)	<b><i>visada</i> ‘vi-sada’</b> (Despair/disgust/dejection/ lassitude)
SSV, KS, BG, TK	<b><i>sukha</i> ‘su-kha’</b> (Pleasant/ happiness agreeable/mild/soothing/comfortable)	<b><i>duhkha</i> ‘duh-kha’</b> (Unpleasant/ pain suffering)	<b><i>moha</i> ‘muh-a’</b> (Bewilderment / delusion / error/perplexity/ /distraction )
SK, TK, STV, SSV, TV, BG, STL	<b><i>prakasa</i> ‘pra-kās-a’</b> (Shining/ clear/reveal/become evident/ manifesting / illuminating )	<b><i>pravrtti</i> ‘pra-vrit-ti’</b> (Activity/to progress/advance/ rise/function)	<b><i>niyama</i> ‘ni-yam-a’</b> (Restrained / limit / annihilate/fixed rule/ to fasten or bind/regulate)
SK, KS, TK	<b><i>laghu</i> ‘lagh-u’</b> (Light / buoyant unimpeded/desirable/ beautiful/clean/ easy)	<b><i>cala</i> ‘cal-a’</b> (Moving / disturbed / confused/unsteady/ fluctuating)	<b><i>guru</i> ‘gur-u’</b> (Heavy/ large/violent/hard/ difficult/excessive)
SK, TK, KS	<b><i>adhasāya</i> ‘adhi-ava-sāya-’</b> (Exist / dwell/inhabit)	<b><i>upastambhaka</i> ‘upa-stambha-ka’</b> (Lacking support/stimulating)	<b><i>varanaka</i> ‘vr-ana-ka’</b> (Resisting/ opposing/wild/dangerous/ restraining)
-	<b><i>shānta</i> ‘sham-ta’</b> (Mental tranquility/ alleviation/ prosperity)	<b><i>ghora</i></b> (Violent/terrible/ magic/ horror/spell)	<b><i>moodha</i> ‘muh-ta’</b> (Gone astray/ bewildered/ stupid/dull/ confusion of mind)

\*STL - *Sāmkhyatattvaloka*  
STV - *Sāmkhyataruvasanta*  
SK - *Sāmkhya Kārikā*  
KS - *Kapila Sāmkhya*  
TK - *Tattva Kaumudi*.

TV - *Tattvavibhākara*  
SSV - *Sāmkhyasaptatvīrti*  
MV - *Mātharavrtti*  
BG - *Bhagavad – Gita*

In conclusion of the conceptual analysis it can be stated that the descriptions about the nature and functions of *triguna* abound in literature and there is fair amount of agreement regarding the essential features. But, what requires further study is how ancient seers and sages primarily conceived *triguna* in psychological terms and then also related it to multifarious manifestations of the universe. This is a matter beyond the scope of this article.

### III Conceptual Synthesis

The complex nature of *triguna* is evident from interpretations and etymology in the available literature. However, if one has to avoid misinterpretations or accumulation of terms in explaining the concept it is essential to recognize the commonality of ideas regarding the meaning, characteristics and manifestation of *triguna* in various texts and their interpretations by scholars of the past and the present in relation to etymology. Since the meaning, nature, functions and manifestations of *triguna* are available in great detail with clarity in the *Aswamedhika parva* of the *Mahābhāratha* in chapters 36 to 39, and in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> chapters of *Bhagavad-Gita*, which have great psychological relevance in understanding human nature these sources may be given central importance in future. The conceptual analysis leads to following conclusions.

**(a) The meaning of the term *guna*:** Close observation of the verses in *Sāmkhya Kārikā*<sup>4</sup> and *Mahābhāratha*<sup>5</sup>, show that *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are equated to the term '*guna*' and to *prakṛti*, thus indicating that *trigunas* are *prakṛti itself* and the relation is *not* one of substance (*dravya*) and its quality (*guna*). Hence, for all practical purpose in psychological discourse we could just refer to the three.

**(b) The nature of '*triguna*':** The source books<sup>6</sup> and the interpretations referred to consider *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* as attached to and dependent on one another, and therefore seen as existing in a state of unison in spite of seeming to be opposed to each other in their essential characteristics. These *trigunas*, which are constantly in the state of flux, pervade the universe and act in turns in various ways in various places and circumstances. Though they vary in predominance in different objects and beings, all the three simultaneously exist in everything in the universe.

**(c) The meaning and nature (*roopa* and *lakshana*<sup>7</sup>, *dharma* and *ātmakah*<sup>8</sup>) of terms *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*:** Several descriptions are given for the three as already described in table 3. The most common descriptions for *sattva* are *prakasa*, *laghu* and

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<sup>4</sup>SK 13

<sup>5</sup>M Bh. *Ashwamedhika parva* 39(25).

<sup>6</sup>SK 12, SK 14 & 15, M Bh *Ashwamedhika parva* 39(1-5; 12; 16-22).

<sup>7</sup>MBh *Ashwamedhika parva* 36 & 37.

<sup>8</sup>*Kapila Sāmkhya*

*priti*; for *rajas apriti*, *dukha*, *raga* and *pravrtti*; and for *tamas visada*, *moha*, *niyama* and *ajnāna*.

**d) The functions (*vritti* and *artha*<sup>9</sup>; *kārya* and *karma*<sup>10</sup>) or manifestations of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*:** *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* permeate everything in the universe, including the animate, the inanimate and the mind. Therefore, manifest form of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* can be categorized into manifestation in the universe and manifestation in human nature.

**Manifestation in the universe:**

*Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* form the principles of illumination, activity, and regulation, which influence everything in the universe. The presence of light, beauty, truth, existence, stability and happiness are attributed to the principle of *sattva*; the presence of movement, intensity and change are due to the principle of *rajas*; and inertia, darkness, and resistance to change are due to the principle of *tamas*. The coexistence and harmony in the functioning of the three principles is regarded significant for the existence and functioning of everything in the universe. The 39<sup>th</sup> adhyāya of *Aswamedhikā Parva* in the *Mahābhārata* regard whatever that exists in this world - the worlds, the celestials, knowledge, the past, the present, the future, religion, *varnas*, profits, pleasures, *prāna*, *apāna*, *udāna*, the day, the fortnights, months, years, seasons, conjunctions,... etc., - as fraught within *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It is regarded that *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* act in the whole creation, both in the manifest and unmanifest realms. They are therefore eternal and ever existent.

Each manifest form, whatever it may be is said to be under the influence of all the three *gunas*. For e.g., the light of the sun is *sattva*; the heat of the sun is *rajas*; and the eclipse of the sun is *tamas*, though the sun is predominantly *sāttvic* in nature (MBh, *Ashwamedika Parva* 39, [13 to 15]). *Sattva* is said to be predominant in *yogis* and among *dhārmic* (virtuous) people and are regarded as '*ūrdhva strotasās*' as they proceed upwards. *Sāttvics* will have less measure of *tamas* and least amount of *rajas* (MBh, *Ashwamedika Parva* 38). *Rajas* is said to be predominant in creatures of middle course or '*madhya strotasās*' (as they remain in the middle i.e., earth), such as in animals, men, women, fluids and houses (MBh, *Ashwamedika Parva* 37). However, it is regarded that *tamas* exists in these creatures in a smaller measure and *sattva* in a much lesser quantity. *Tamas* is said to be predominant in all inanimate things, in plants and animals, vehicles, insects, birds, egg laying animals, quadruplets, in the insane, deaf, dumb, and the diseased. These creatures are regarded as '*avag strotasās*', as they sink low and downwards. However, small measures of *rajas* and least measure of *sattva* influence them (MBh, *Ashwamedika Parva*, 36).

**Manifestation in human nature and core traits:**

The manifestation of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in human nature are described exhaustively in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and in the *Sāmkhya* literature. Though *Sāmkhya Kārikā* is an authoritative text on the nature of *prakṛti* and *trigunas*, the manifestation of *trigunas* in human nature is not elaborated. In the *Sāmkhya Kārikā*, the manifestations of *sattva*, *rajas* and of *tamas* are not separated into three, but just as *sāttvic* and non-*sāttvic* in which *raga*, *anishwarya*, *adharma* qualities are

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<sup>9</sup> SK 13

<sup>10</sup> MBh *Ashwamedika parva* 36 to 38.

summarized as not *sāttvic*. Therefore, for details of manifestations of *triguna* in human nature, other sources viz., *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Ashwamedhikaparva* of *Mahābhāratha*, *Sāmkhyasaptatvrtti* and *Sāmkhya Chandrika* were referred to and the most agreed upon terms i.e., in more than three sources are listed in Table 5.

**Table 5 Terms most often used to refer to manifestations of *triguna* in human nature.**

<i>Sattva</i>	<i>Rajas</i>	<i>Tamas</i>
<i>Jnāna</i> (Knowledge) (BG, SK, SC, MBH, SSV)	<i>Dukha</i> (Pain) (MBH, BG, SSV)	<i>Ajnāna</i> (Ignorance) (BG, SK < SC, MBH, SSV)
<i>Ārjava</i> (Simple) (BG, MBH, SC, SSV)	<i>Matsara</i> (Malice) (MBH, SC, SSV)	<i>Moha</i> (Delusion) (MBH, SSV, BG)
<i>Sukha</i> (Happiness) (BG, SSV < MBH)	<i>Ninda</i> (blame) (SC, MBH, SSV)	<i>Bhaya</i> (Fear) (MBH, SC, SSV)
<i>Kshama</i> (Forgiveness) (SC, MBH, BG)	<i>Raga</i> (Passion) (BG, MBH, SK)	
<i>Shraddha</i> (Faith) (SC, MBH, BG)		
<i>Satya</i> (Truth) (SSV, MBH, BG)		

It is proposed here that these may be considered as the core traits related to respective *gunas*.

**(e) The result of being *sāttvic* / *rājasic* / *tāmasic*:**

The result or *phala* of doing *sāttvic*, *rājasic* and *tāmasic* deeds are regarded as experience of purity (*nirmalatva*), suffering (*dukha*) and ignorance (*ajnāna*) respectively, according to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, 14(16).

**f. The means of ascent or improvement of an individual:**

The improvement of an individual from the bondage and suffering is regarded as through thorough knowledge of *trigunas* and their functioning. Once such person becomes emancipated from all the three *gunas* he or she enjoys ultimate happiness.

**Mathew's *Poorna chakra* – A model of personality and development of consciousness rooted in concept *triguna***

Thus there is a need to develop models on Indian concepts after a thorough study of the literature in such a way that it serves the purpose of the modern psychologists to categorize personality types and to do further research on Indian understanding of personality. Among the many contemporary psychologists who have worked on *triguna* and developed measures, the work of Mathew (1972, 1976, 1995, 2001) appear to correspond most to the classical understanding. Not only that he has made use of these concepts, he has attempted to interpret the relation of the *triguna* and their manifestations in human nature drawing on contemporary developments in physical and psychological sciences. It is summarized below.

According to Mathew (2001) man's personality is constituted of both subtle and material (gross body) aspects. Mind is the outcome of the subtle awareness of these aspects of personality and is a band of vibrations. Each mind (an individual) has its own average unique vibration with constituent vibrations or sub frequencies, the

combination of which gives a unique quality to that mind. The extent to which the qualities of mind vary (*sattva* called as stability; *rajas* called as activation and *tamas* called as inertia) help differentiate an individual's mind from the other minds. As he defines them, Inertia (I) is introverted instability or proneness to development of introverted type of maladjustment under stress, due to behavioural inhibition (brain process). The root cause of inertia is 'fear' which is also their strong emotion. The characteristics of inertia are lethargy, fear, anxiety, low initiative, low self-confidence, low self-respect and external locus of control. They have least awareness\*, susceptible to dissociation and least control on mind\*. Activation (A) is extraverted instability or proneness to development of extraverted types of maladjustments under stress due to behavioural excitation. The cause of activation is compensatory aggressiveness and the predominant emotions are anger, passion and possessive love. People with high activation are impatient, hasty, risk taking, rash, adventurous, analytical, efficient in planning, competitive\*, assertive, aggressive\*, dominant, maniacal, proud, rebellious, greedy, egoistic and have internal locus of control. Their mind is more integrated than inertia types. However they experience mood swings\*. Stability (S) is stress tolerance and freedom from fear and maladjustment tendencies, present centered, egoless, and non-conventional. The main characteristics being high self-awareness, sensitivity, freedom, flexibility and control. Persons with high S are wise\*, holistic\*, altruistic\* full of love / compassion, transcending and broadminded\*, have natural moral sense based on mature love\*, have awareness of inherent morality with well-integrated personality, capable of functioning differently in different situations and have complete self-control and awareness.

As Mathew (2001) observes a person's growth involves improving and purifying the vibrational quality of mind. In other words transcending I and A towards S, as I and A are two disharmonies from S, which is the ideal state. The movement need not be from I to A and then to S, but it can be from I to S or A to S. The end of personal growth or evolution of mind is attainment of super stability which is absolute sensitivity, integration, stress tolerance, invulnerability and transcendence.

Mathew (2001) suggests various practices for each type of personality for their personal growth. The model for formation and dissolution of mind explains the process of formation of a separate consciousness from the pure consciousness, birth of I, A and S, the process of personal growth, losing of I or A, and finally reaching the absolute consciousness. Mathew has called his model as *poorna chakra*, which involves evolution and involution.

### **Conclusion**

*Triguna* is an important concept in Indian tradition that can help us to understand not only human nature, but also man's relation with cosmos, since they underlie both material and mental manifestations. The ancient seers and sages were able to effectively avoid the mind-matter dualism, using *triguna* as the fundamental concept to explain all phenomena in the universe. Nevertheless, the explanations and interpretations offered over thousands of years have lead to many confusions and complications. Contemporary psychologists have not grasped the full import of the three gunas and the available literature requires further study, to distinguish what is inherent to the three gunas and what are their manifestations in the phenomenal world. Still this point is not clear. The present paper has only highlighted some issues and has



brought together several usages and meanings, so that future research may use them and apply modern psychological methods –qualitative and quantitative – to arrive at precise understanding of these concepts.

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\*These are comparable to the classical understanding of core manifestations of *triguna* in human nature

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